

BOOK REVIEWS

Law, Liberty, and Anarchism in the Progressive Era

Willrich, Michael. *American Anarchy: The Epic Struggle between Immigrant Radicals and the US Government at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Basic Books, 2023. 480 pp. \$32.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1541697379.

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For the perennial instructor of the American history survey course, anarchism might receive passing mention among a cacophony of competing Progressive Era movements, but Michael Willrich (Brandeis University) tells a much larger story in his latest book, *American Anarchy: The Epic Struggle between Immigrant Radicals and the US Government at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century*. Willrich is no stranger to Progressive Era legal and social history. His first two books, *City of Courts* (2003) and *Pox: An American History* (2011), focused on urban battles against vice, immorality, and disease. Willrich's keen eye for social “undesirables” continues with *American Anarchy*, a captivating work that makes the seemingly anathema elements of American anarchism accessible to a broad audience. The book, Willrich writes, is “the story of two antithetical utopian ideals—anarchism and the rule of law—and the extraordinary individuals whose living out of those ideals under the most trying of circumstances helped change the course of American history” (11).

Those “extraordinary individuals” primarily include two anarchists, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, and their lawyer, Harry Weinberger. The broader cast of characters is extensive, including other famed anarchists such as Johann Most and Peter Kropotkin as well as American officials such as J. Edgar Hoover, Mitchell Palmer, and Woodrow Wilson. The “war on anarchy,” Willrich asserts, inspired a massive development in America's ability to find and prosecute those with the “wrong” views. “It is simply impossible to explain the dramatic rise in the early-twentieth-century United States of the federal surveillance state . . . without appreciating the abiding importance of anarchism in the nation's public life,” the author writes (13).

Immigrant anarchists, Willrich argues, weren't necessarily surveilled and prosecuted for illegal actions as much as for their dangerous ideas. The author quotes one U.S. attorney who claimed in 1917 that Goldman and Berkman were “exceedingly

dangerous to the peace and security of the United States” (5). While their ideas implicitly threatened liberal order, oftentimes those swept up in the dragnet of the fledgling surveillance state technically broke no laws, at least until new laws were created specifically for them, such as New York’s Criminal Anarchy Law (1901) and Woodrow Wilson’s 1918 Immigration Act.

Willrich places the “peak years of the [anarchist] movement” in the 1910s—when the movement may have numbered as many as 100,000 in the United States—but he tracks the American government’s growing concern about these radicals to at least the Haymarket Affair in 1886, which resulted in the state execution of four anarchists. What was it about anarchism that seemingly made it “a crime against the whole human race,” as Theodore Roosevelt called it (14)? An extension of nineteenth-century labor radicalism, anarchism denied the legitimacy of not only industrial capitalism and “wage slavery,” but also the institution which upheld these values: the state. Willrich astutely describes turn-of-the-century anarchism as a “strikingly cosmopolitan, resolutely radical ideology” and “a set of ideas and ideals that were rooted in the Enlightenment and shaped by political revolutions and capitalist transformations of the nineteenth century.” Anarchists opposed “nation-states, sovereignty, borders, laws, religions, prisons, and private property,” he writes (4). And yet, one of the many strengths of the book is the author’s attention to detail: many anarchists were *not* bomb-throwers, or even believers in the “deed.” Willrich rightly differentiates between those willing to use violence to achieve their radical ends and the more “philosophical anarchists.” The problem for the movement as a whole, however, was that “few politicians and newspaper writers of the early twentieth century acknowledged [this] distinction” (12). In their escalated aim to stamp out the “deadly foreign contagion” of anarchism, the U.S. government therefore pursued even those who only *thought* like anarchists. And officials pursued no one more vigorously than Emma Goldman, Queen of the Reds (53).

Stories of Goldman and Berkman have been told before—though Willrich does so thoroughly and compellingly—but an added strength of the book is the emphasis the author places on “radical lawyers” who worked alongside these anarchist subversives. Indeed, the budding civil liberties movement is the other half of the story, answering the question, to what extent could denizens of America express dangerous ideas? The irony, as Willrich notes, is that anarchists were fundamentally against the state and courts entirely, and yet came around to the idea that the courtroom was a stage and a pulpit for their radical views. “Anarchist doctrine dismissed the very idea of constitutional rights as a delusion,” Willrich writes, “and yet anarchists stood at the forefront of free speech agitation” (120). In addition to railing against the state and capitalism, these immigrant radicals often advocated for free love, birth control, gender equality, and against the “slavery” of a military draft. The last of these—encouraging “No Conscription”—ultimately led to Goldman’s demise and eventual expulsion to Russia, a major win for Mitchell Palmer, J. Edgar Hoover, and the fast-growing American surveillance state. And yet by this time she and other anarchists, as well as their lawyers, had tested the limits of American liberalism and won small battles within the much larger war on supposedly dangerous ideas.

Readers are encouraged to pay special attention to Willrich’s survey of the various immigration laws and legal statutes used to pursue anarchists, as well as his coverage of court cases that would go on to provide both space for, and limitations on, civil

liberties. Historiographically, *American Anarchism* will serve as a useful companion alongside recent histories of anarchism such as Kenyon Zimmer's *Immigrants Against the State* (2015) and Andrew Cornell's *Unruly Equality* (2016), both of which Willrich cites. Ultimately, the author is sympathetic to his anarchist protagonists, and he does not shy away from the relevance of their critiques against state power in a liberal democracy. "In the end," Willrich writes, "the American ideal of a 'government of laws, not men' is not a delusion. But the ideal is only as real and true as the women and men who, in such necessitous times, will stand tall before the juggernaut of uncontrolled power" (376).

Efficiency Comes for the Colleges

Ris, Ethan W. *Other People's Colleges: The Origins of American Higher Education Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 387 pp. \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0226820224.

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"The goose that lays golden eggs has been considered a most valuable possession," Louis Brandeis wrote in *Other People's Money*, his famed 1914 exposé of the nation's big banks. "But even more profitable," he added, "is the privilege of taking the golden eggs laid by someone else's goose."¹ Ethan W. Ris's *Other People's Colleges: The Origins of American Higher Education Reform* traces how a different but no less influential group attempted to control the dispensation of another kind of golden egg: college education. Ris's book outlines how a loose coalition of reformers, referred to as "academic engineers," worked to restructure American higher education between the 1890s and 1930s.

Most narratives of Progressive Era school reform, especially concerning elementary and secondary education, focus on would-be reformers' attempts to expand the scope and reach of schooling. While many of those efforts were coercive or propped up existing social hierarchies, they nonetheless operated under the premise that the more schools, the better. In contrast, academic engineers who sought to transform American higher education felt there were too many colleges and, by extension, too many college students.

¹Louis D. Brandeis, *Other People's Money and How the Bankers Use It* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914), 17–18.